Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

SECRET—EYES ONLY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Foreword	i
Positions of prominent people in late 1963	ii
The anti-government riots begin	1
Attacks on pagodas; imposition of martial law	2
Discussion of US response to pagoda raids	2
Conein meeting with General Don	3
CIA guidance on State telegram re alternative leadership	3
Richardson's personal views re alternate leadership	3
Harriman informs Helms of the substance of Deptel 243	4
Deptel 243: guidance to Lodge on improving or replacing regime	4
Hilsman comment supplementing Deptel 243	5
Marguerite Higgins on Deptel 243	5
Hqs points out danger posed by Deptel 243; directs CIA support	7
Gen. Khanh requests assurances of U.S. support	7
Initial embassy meeting to discuss Deptel 243	7
Lodge presents his credentials to Diem	8
Second thoughts on authorizations given Lodge in Deptel 243	8
Saigon reports instructions given CIA officers seeing the generals	9
Results of CIA approaches to the generals	9
More second thoughts on Deptel 243	9
Lodge and Harkins are asked for an interim appraisal of prospects.	10
COS believes situation has reached point of no return	10
Continuing concern over poor prospects for success of coup	10
Taylor cables Harkins re Washington's second thoughts	11
Taylor's cable to Harkins causes Richardson to change scenario	12
Steps to be taken to get the coup back on the track	12
Discussion of where coup planning went astray	13
General Harkins' meeting with General Khiem	13
Discussion of ways in which we might live with Diem regime	14
Colby's summary of differing positions taken	14
Richardson reports collapse of coup plot in late August	15
Richardson's damage assessment report	15
Press reports of CIA coup plotting	16
Further discussion of ways of working with Diem regime	16
Press reports of CIA support of Col. Tung's Special Forces	17
David Bell warns of aid cuts	17
President denies charge that CIA makes its own policy	19
Richardson's views on prospects for immediate future	19
Krulak & Mendenhall reports; optimism vs. pessimism	19
Bundy stresses need to unify US government posture	20
Disagreements among country team members	20
Lodge estimates situation worsening rapidly; urges sanctions	21
Discussion of steps necessary before deciding to cut aid	21
State begins to see no alternative to working with Diem	22
Sheldon's view on Vietnam; Lodge still pursuing coup effort	22

SECRET—EYES ONLY

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

14-00000

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

~~SECRET-EYES ONLY~~

	Page
Press reports of dissension in US mission & CIA station	23
Richardson's views on need to work with Diem regime	24
DDP conversation with Dave Smith re possible Richardson ouster	24
Lodge changes position; agrees must work with Diem regime	24
DCI writes Lodge that Lansdale not acceptable as COS	25
DCI briefing of CIA Subcommittee of House Armed Services	25
McNamara-Taylor report: can withdraw troops by end of 1965	26
Lodge confirms his desire that Richardson be replaced	26
Richardson departs	26
Discussion of guidance based on McNamara-Taylor report	27
Gen. Minh requests assurances re US position on coup attempt	27
Dave Smith recommends we not oppose generals'assassination plan	28
McCone instructs Smith to withdraw recommendation	28
Smith confirms he had done so	29
Guidance to Lodge; suspension of AID project loans	30
President approves policy of no active encouragement of coup	30
UN fact-finding mission on repression of Buddhists	30
President comments on Richardson transfer; CIA follows guidance	32
Modification of policy of no coup encouragement	32
Ambassador's instructions re CIA contacts with generals	33
DCI briefing of Senate Foreign Relations Committee	33
The generals' plan for a coup in the week following Oct 26	33
Budget Bureau officer reports Lodge charges against CIA	34
Follow-up meetings between Conein and Gen. Don, 24 Oct	35
Bundy reservations over handling of contacts with generals	35
Lodge reports CIA punctilious in carrying out his instructions	35
Coup plotting; US government policy; DCI's views	36
Lodge confirms Conein's bona fides to Gen. Don	36
Last Conein/Don meeting before the coup was launched	37
Lodge gives his views on current coup plotting (29 Oct)	38
Discussion of chances of success of the planned coup	38
Bundy-to-Lodge cable giving detailed guidance re coup posture	39
Lodge says we have no power to delay or discourage a coup	39
The White House rejects Lodge's views	39
Lodge thanks Washington for "sagacious instruction"	40
Coup begins; Conein goes to JGS Hqs; takes money with him	40
CRITIC reporting on coup identifies Conein by name	42
The assassination	43
Recap	44

~~SECRET-EYES ONLY~~

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

14-00000

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

~~SECRET—EYES ONLY~~

31 May 1967

FOREWORD

This account of CIA and U.S. Government involvement in the Vietnamese generals' coup of 1 November 1963 is drawn from documentary sources. Not all of the documents summarized or quoted bear directly on the coup itself. We included some that may seem irrelevant, because they illuminate the atmosphere in which U.S. Government policy decisions were reached.

We interviewed only three people in the course of this inquiry: William Colby, Chief of FE Division at the time (and now); John Richardson, Chief of Station during the coup plotting of August 1963; and David Smith, Acting Chief of Station at the time of the coup/assassination of November 1963. Each assured us that he knew of no CIA assassination schemes against Diem--other than the role played by CIA in maintaining contacts, by direction, with the Vietnamese generals.

Many of the documents upon which this report is based are classified TOP SECRET. Since the report is being delivered personally and in only one copy, we have chosen not to subject it to the external accountability controls that are entailed in a TOP SECRET classification.

On the following page is a list of U.S. Government officials whose names are mentioned in the report, together with the positions they held at the time.

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

John F. Kennedy	The President
Lyndon B. Johnson	Vice President
McGeorge Bundy	Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs
Dean Rusk	Secretary of State
George W. Ball	Under Secretary of State
W. Averell Harriman	Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs
Roger Hilsman	Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs
Joseph A. Mendenhall	UN Adviser, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs
Frederick E. Nolting	Ambassador (left Saigon 16 August 1963)
Henry Cabot Lodge	Ambassador (arr. Saigon 23 August 1963)
William C. Trueheart	DCM
Robert McNamara	Secretary of Defense
Roswell Gilpatric	Deputy Secretary of Defense
Gen. Maxwell Taylor	Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff
Gen. Victor Krulak	Counterinsurgency Specialist, JCS
Adm. Harry D. Felt	CINCPAC
Gen. Paul D. Harkins	Commander, MACV
Gen. Richard G. Weede	Chief of Staff, MACV
John McCone	Director of Central Intelligence
Gen. Marshall Carter	DDCI
Richard Helms	Deputy Director for Plans
John Richardson	CIA Chief of Station until 5 October 1963
David R. Smith	CIA Acting COS after 5 October 1963
William Colby	Chief, FE Division

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

~~SECRET~~-EYES ONLY

The successful coup against the Diem regime in South Vietnam, which resulted in the deaths of Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother, Nhu, began on 1 November 1963 at 1315 hours, Saigon time (0015 hours, Washington time).

This report on CIA and U.S. Government involvement in the coup consists of a chronological listing of events, actions, and deliberations having to do with Vietnam. The report is drawn entirely from documentary sources, either by quoting selectively or by summarizing. Significant overt happenings having bearing on official actions are included in the chronology. Facts on File, a weekly digest of world news, was used as the source for these historical events. Also included are a few excerpts from Marguerite Higgins' book Our Vietnam Nightmare* to demonstrate the extent to which some once-classified information is now common knowledge.

All dates are in 1963.

8 May

Riots erupted in Hue.

10 July

SNIE 53-2-63: "The Situation in South Vietnam"

"If--as is likely--Diem fails to carry out truly and promptly

****

*Marguerite Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare (New York: Harper & Row, 1965)

~~SECRET~~-EYES ONLY

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

the commitment he has made to the Buddhists, disorders will probably flare again and the chances of a coup or assassination attempts against him will become even better. . . . . We do not think . . . the Communists would necessarily profit if he were overthrown by some combination of his non-Communist opponents. A non-Communist successor regime might be initially less effective against the Viet Cong, but, given continued support from the US, could provide reasonably effective leadership for the government and the war effort."

14 August

Current Intelligence Memorandum (OCI No. 2339/63): "Coup Rumors in South Vietnam"

" . . . . . The coup reports and rumors which have arisen since the Buddhist crisis seem to reflect some serious coup plotting, but we have no firm evidence of advanced planning by any group to attempt to overthrow the regime. . . . . "

21 August

South Vietnamese troops and police attacked and occupied Buddhist pagodas throughout the country. Diem imposed nation-wide martial law.

Presidential Meeting on Vietnam. CIA participants: DCI, DDP, & C/FE. Record by C/FE.

Mr. Ball recommended that we continue to provide asylum for the two bonzes [Buddhist monks] until Lodge arrives and reviews the matter. It was agreed that official channels should not be made available for transmitting press dispatches by American reporters in Saigon. On the matter of possible alternate leadership in Vietnam, it was pointed out that there was no indication that Diem was not in full control.

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

21 August (continued)

Current Intelligence Memorandum (OCI No. 2341/63): "Coup Rumors in South Vietnam"

"Additional reports of plotting against the Diem government have been received. While there is no hard evidence of imminent action, the Buddhist issue continues to make the situation dangerous."

Saigon Station's Chronology of August 1963 Coup Activities

At a meeting between Conein [an officer of the CIA Saigon Station] and General Don, the latter asked for US Government assurances of support for moves against the Diem regime.

22 August ✓✓

CIA cable to Saigon (DIR 63334)

"Ref Dept. telegram in process. Reftel (which Hqs. not yet seen) states basic line to be taken and directs it be pushed at all levels. Hilsman requested Hqs. send companion telegram to station pointing out that this is one technique to bring about surfacing of where and who real power is. Pressing this line can maximize possibility of obtaining US objective. Even if it does not succeed, it can substantially assist in identification of alternate or successor leadership with necessary drive, abilities and ambition, to incorporate in our overall contingency planning and serve as focus of buildup program. Hqs. will comment in further detail after seeing message, if necessary, but passes above at Hilsman's request."

CIA cable from Saigon (SAIG 0208)

Chief of Station John Richardson forwards his personal views re alternate leadership: " . . . . . Recent events have made us feel that hope for civilian government to replace Diem administration is

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

unrealistic. The solution seems even more improbable than ever before. Would appear that we shall have either Diem or military junta. . . . . View time factor have not coordinated this message with embassy but we have exchanged views fully on subject matter."

24 August

Telephone call from Harriman to DD/P. Record by DD/P.

Mr. Harriman called Mr. Helms just before 2000 hours and outlined to him the substance of what eventually turned out to be Deptel 243 to Saigon. To Helms query, Harriman confirmed that the thrust of the telegram contained an implicit pull out of American forces and support if the Nhus' were not ousted. Harriman said that the message had been cleared "with Hyannisport," with the Secretary of State, and with Mr. Gilpatric.

Deptel 243

State telegram to Saigon (Deptel 243)

The Department informs the Ambassador that the US government cannot tolerate a situation in which power lies in Nhu's hands. If Diem is unwilling to rid himself of Nhu, then Diem himself may have to go. The Ambassador is authorized: (1) to inform the GVN that actions against Buddhists must be redressed; (2) to tell key military leaders that the USG cannot support a Diem regime that includes the Nhu's and that "we will give them direct support in any interim period of breakdown central government mechanism;" (3) to make statements in Saigon removing

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

the military taint on the pagoda raids. The telegram includes the following statement:

"The Ambassador and country team should urgently examine all possible alternative leadership and make detailed plans as to how we might bring about Diem's replacement if this should become necessary. You will understand that we cannot from Washington give you detailed instructions as to how this operation should proceed, but you will also know we will back you to the hilt on actions you take to achieve our objectives."

25 August

Cable from Hilsman to Lodge (personal) sent via CIA channels (DIR 63854)

"State cable sent separately represents agonizing at highest levels. Course outlined is dangerous but all agree that delaying clear cut US stand is even more dangerous. It won't be easy for you, but be assured we will back you all the way."

(Comment: This is a good point at which to break the narrative and insert a series of excerpts from Marguerite Higgins' book:

"The crucial act, with its overtones of Greek tragedy, opened with a cable. It was dispatched to Saigon late in the evening of August 24, 1963, a date made more significant because it was a Saturday. Washington usually empties on summer weekends or lapses into a somnolent mood as officials desperately seek relaxation.

"The telegram contained spectacular new instructions for the U.S. embassy in Saigon. It was drawn up at a meeting called by Under-secretary of State Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern affairs and head of the Vietnam task force. The President's senior advisers were, for

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

14-00000

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

the most part, out of town. CIA Director John McCone was in California. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara was on vacation. Secretary of State Dean Rusk was attending a baseball game in New York. President Kennedy was at Hyannis Port. General Taylor says he knew nothing of the meeting until it was over and the telegram long on its way.

Senior People Would Of Atty.

" . . . the cable proved historic. For the first time it gave the signal to 'unleash' the Vietnamese military, flashed a green light for the coup against Diem of which the generals had been talking for so many years.

" . . . the cable of August 24 was a radical revision of the previous philosophy of one war at a time. It envisaged the generals' making war on their own government, and with the implicit blessing of the United States.

"The substance of the cable was that the U.S. embassy was to make an effort to persuade Diem to fire his brother, release the Buddhist rebels, end press censorship, and restore other democratic liberties suspended under martial law. And if, as the cable anticipated, Diem would not do these things, then the embassy was to contact the Vietnamese generals and tell them that the United States would no longer stand in the way of a revolt.

" . . . the controversial August 24 cable was dispatched from Washington Saturday evening after being cryptically summarized to President Kennedy at the summer White House at Hyannis Port.

"The acting Secretary of Defense, Roswell Gilpatric . . . had the cable described to him over the telephone. Mr. Gilpatric says he was frankly surprised that such an important set of instructions should be rushed out on a weekend. But he did not feel that he ought to veto the telegram since . . . it had the 'approval of the President.'

"In McCone's absence, the cable was described, again cryptically, to Richard Helms, deputy director of the CIA, who also did not feel disposed to veto something 'approved by the President.'"

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

25 August (continued)

CIA cable to Saigon (DIR 63855)

"FYI CIA not consulted re cable being sent separately, which however cleared at highest levels. In circumstances believe CIA must fully accept directives of policy makers and seek ways accomplish objectives they seek. While have not seen exact text, understand it invites Lodge final judgment. . . . . Danger in present course of action appears to be throwing away bird in hand before we adequately identified birds in bush, or songs they may sing. Thus suggest a real search for courses of action which might retain options in our hands at same time as taking positive stand rather than waiting for situation to clarify (at which point we probably unable to affect it.) This boils down to seeking some middle ground for at least interim period. . . . . "

CIA cable from Saigon (SAIG 0291)

Chief of Station Richardson reports that General Khanh requested an immediate meeting with Spera [an officer of the CIA Saigon Station]. At the meeting Khanh requested assurances that the U.S. Government would support the Vietnamese army if it should move against the Diem Regime.

CIA Cable from Saigon (SAIG 0296)

Richardson reports the results of a conference among Ambassador Lodge, DCM Truehart, General Harkins, General Weede, and Richardson. The group agreed that giving Diem an option had no chance of success. They accepted Deptel 243 [of 24 August] as a basic decision from Washington and would proceed to do their best to carry out instructions.

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

~~SECRET—EYES ONLY~~

Richardson gives headquarters his views on possible successor regimes.

26 August

ONE Staff Memorandum, No. 60-63, Internal ONE Working Paper, CIA Distribution Only

"On balance, we believe the best hope for the preservation of US interests and attainment of US objectives in South Vietnam lies in the possibility of a coup d'etat by anti-Communist nationalists with sufficient military support to obviate prolonged civil war. Such a group might not prove able to salvage the situation and, indeed, might eventually prove no better than the present regime. Such a development would, however, enable the US and anti-Communist nationalist elements to make a fresh start unencumbered and unhampered by political errors of past years, months, and weeks. In such a fresh start, we believe, lies the only viable hope for the attainment of US interests and objectives in South Vietnam."

Ambassador Lodge presented his credentials to South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem.

26 Aug

Presidential Meeting on Vietnam. CIA participants: DDCI & DDP. Record by DDP.

The question was raised as to whether there had been such a significant change in the Vietnam situation that it really appeared desirable to dump the Nhu's and possibly Diem himself. Principal points discussed were: Admiral Felt's concern over the dangers inherent in the current US action in South Vietnam; the fact that Lodge had not seen Diem to discuss the future role of the Nhu's;

~~SECRET—EYES ONLY~~

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

14-00000

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

~~SECRET EYES ONLY~~

the meaning of the phrase "give direct support to military commanders" in Deptel 243; the question of succession; and what would happen if the action taken over the weekend failed. The President asked for another session on August 27 with participants to present biographic data on key SVN personalities and a contingency plan for the succession.

CIA cable from Saigon (SAIG 0304)

Richardson reports that the Ambassador decided that the American official hand should not show in the operation. It was agreed that Conein would see Khiem and that Spera would see Khanh. Conein and Spera were directed to convey the substance of Deptel 243, plus this comment: "We cannot be of any help during initial action of assuming power of state. Entirely their own action, win or lose."

CIA cable from Saigon (SAIG 0330)

Richardson reports the results of the Conein/Spera approaches to the generals. In essence, Khanh said he was not yet ready, and Khiem said he would have to check with Minh.

27 August

2 days since Deptel 243

Presidential Meeting on Vietnam. CIA participants: DDCI, DDP, & C/FE. Record by C/FE.

The President stated that a coup should not be attempted unless it would be successful and asked whether we could turn back at this point.

~~SECRET EYES ONLY~~

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

The President asked that the judgment of Lodge and Harkins be sought on the prospects for victory or defeat of a coup. A cable was drafted asking if they still agreed with their concurrences to Deptel 243.

State telegram to Saigon (Deptel 256)

"Examination of reports to date gives considerable hope but leaves unanswered questions. . . . . Proceeding from the concept outlined in Deptel 243 as modified, now desire your prompt interim appraisal of present prospects. . . . . Highest authority asks whether you and Harkins, in light of developing situation, presently favor operation as currently planned by generals. We wish to give you all possible support in best available course but not to insist on any decision that developing evidence makes it wise to modify."

28 August

CIA cable from Saigon (SAIG 0363)

Richardson reports that: "Situation here has reached point of no return. . . . . Unless the generals are neutralized before being able to launch their operations, we believe they will act and that they have good chance to win. . . . . We all understand that the effort must succeed and that whatever needs to be done on our part must be done. . . . . "

Presidential Meeting on Vietnam. CIA participants: DDCI, DDP, & C/FE. Record by C/FE.

The President inquired into the status of E&E plans and was told that these were well worked out. State Department participants insisted that Diem and Nhu had betrayed and double-crossed us and we had no obligations to them and that we cannot win with Diem and Nhu.

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

14-00000

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

The President commented that we had been winning until August. Nolting expressed his conviction that Diem is the only man who can run South Vietnam in any fashion to permit a continuance of the war effort. He believed we should make another try to keep Diem. Harriman directly disagreed with him. The President directed that a telegram be prepared to send to Lodge and Harkins asking their view of the chances of success, expressing concern over the unfavorable ratio of forces, and inviting their suggestions as to how we could increase their possibilities. The President called for another meeting later in the day.

NSC Executive Committee Meeting on Vietnam. CIA participants not identified. Record by DDP.

The President met privately with Rusk, McNamara, Taylor and McGeorge Bundy. He reported to the rest of the Committee merely that three telegrams were being sent to Saigon: a personal message to Lodge from the President, a general message from the Department to the Ambassador, and a telegram from Taylor to Harkins.

Telegram from Taylor to Harkins (JCS 3368-63)

"Important White House meeting on subject scheduled for 1200 28 August EDT, your views urgently needed on overall feasibility of operation contemplated. . . . . FYI State to Saigon 243 was prepared without DOD or JCS participation. Authorities are now having second thoughts."

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

14-00000

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

~~SECRET—EYES ONLY~~

29 August

Saigon Station's chronology of August 1963 coup activities

"At 0745 hours, Richardson, Spera and Conein, latter two of whom were scheduled to contact Generals Minh and Khiem at 0815 same morning, were shown a message from General Taylor to General Harkins stating aspects of Vietnam situation being reviewed at White House and commenting that second thoughts were beginning in Washington. Faced with this information and given strictly limited time factors, Richardson decided that the meeting with Generals Minh and Khiem should not be postponed but that contacting officers would make this meeting a fact-finding mission without encouraging or discouraging General Minh.

"When Spera and Conein returned from their meeting with Khiem and Minh, we proceeded to Trueheart's office to make our report. The Ambassador came in and Richardson advised him of our meeting with General Weede, of Taylor's cable, and of the decisions which Richardson had made as a result of the Taylor cable. Lodge was angry and expressed the view that Richardson's decision had destroyed the possibilities of carrying out a coup. Richardson expressed a firm dissenting opinion."

NSC Executive Committee Meeting on Vietnam. CIA participants not identified. Record by DDP.

The consensus was that Harkins should confirm to the generals that the approaches from CIA were bona fide and represented the views of the US government. There was agreement that better information was needed on what the generals were in fact planning to do and whether it was militarily feasible. A telegram giving the sense of the meeting was drafted for Presidential approval.

~~SECRET—EYES ONLY~~

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

14-00000

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

30 August

Vice Presidential Meeting on Vietnam. CIA participants: DDCI, DDP, & C/FE. Record by C/FE.

Rusk referred to recent cable traffic and said that he was not even sure whom we were dealing with or what they were planning. McNamara pointed out there was some question whether the generals ever did have a plan. Bundy said he had re-read the earlier traffic and noted that they never said they did. Gen. Carter said he believed that the general's coup was not likely at this stage and that in another week we will be approximately where we were before the attack on the Buddhist temples. Bundy suggested we consider additional contingencies before the group and whether the assumption that Nhu is impossible is well founded.

31 August

Saigon Station's chronology of August 1963 coup activities

"General Harkins was authorized to meet with Khiem to give Khiem assurances of USG backing. Khiem showed a reluctance to talk and suggested that Harkins meet with General Minh. Khiem commented that Minh had called off the planning and was working on other methods which Khiem would not describe. Khiem further stated that the generals were not ready as they did not have enough forces under their control. Harkins decided not to give Khiem assurances which he had been authorized to impart. Lodge approved Harkins' decision on 31 August after Harkins reported.

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

~~SECRET-EYES ONLY~~

31 August (continued)

Vice Presidential Meeting on Vietnam. CIA participants: DDCI, DDP, & C/FE. Record by C/FE.

Rusk suggested we look at precisely what in the Vietnam situation made us think of a coup and what might be done to improve conditions in Vietnam. McNamara suggested the first requirement was reestablishment of communication between Lodge and Harkins. Rusk directed that a telegram be prepared for Saigon making suggestions as to what we might ask the GVN to do.

Chief, FE, who participated in the meetings of late August, in a memorandum for Walter Elder provided this summary of differing positions taken.

"In the discussions during the past week, the position of the Department of State, led by Ball, Harriman, and Hilsman, was that the Diem-Nhu government had double-crossed the US Government because of the attack on the pagodas and that US obligations to the government were no longer valid. Further, that a government so discredited could not conduct successfully the war in Vietnam and would prove an undesirable liability to the US Government elsewhere in Asia. Because of these moral, military and political conclusions, the Department recommended that it must give all support to a group of generals who allegedly were disaffected to the point that a clear indication of US action was the only ingredient lacking for them to push over a discredited, unpopular and weak Diem government.

"The position of the Department of Defense was that while it deplored the sensational aspects of the Buddhist situation, it nonetheless felt that an effort should be continued to deal with Diem and try to bring about a compromise, and at the same time to keep in touch with the generals and support the coup efforts, if this proved to be the only alternative left. This was essentially the view of General Harkins and of Ambassdor Holting. This was considered by the Department of State to be a foot-dragging and weak position.

~~SECRET-EYES ONLY~~

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

"The President viewed the State Department's position with considerable reserve but was willing to explore the coup idea further. He and the Attorney General (as well as CIA) were apparently appalled at the speed with which the State decision was reached on Saturday afternoon, 24 August, and felt that more thought, analysis and preparation should have preceded the instruction to Lodge."

31 August (continued)

CIA cable from Saigon (SAIG 0499)

"This particular coup is finished. . . . . Generals did not feel ready and did not have sufficient balance of forces. . . . . There is little doubt that GVN aware US role and may have considerable detail. . . . . "

2 September

CIA cable from Saigon (SAIG 0523)

Richardson cabled a damage assessment. He concluded that Diem and the Nhu's are fully aware that the USG encouraged the generals to attempt a coup and that CIA was the instrumentality of this encouragement. He judged there was an even possibility that all major programs could go forward as in the past. He listed as a major dilemma the Station's future relationships with Col. Tung. He noted his dissatisfaction with Tung as a GVN liaison vehicle through which to conduct PM programs, but noted that the GVN had offered no alternative. Unless we were willing to discontinue our NVN, Laos border, and cross-border programs, we must continue to work with Tung.

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

2 September (continued)

The Times of Vietnam published charges that the CIA was plotting and financing a coup and was giving asylum to the chief anti-Diem Buddhist leader. The story was picked up and widely played by the New York Daily News, the Chicago Tribune, Baltimore Sun, and other prominent newspapers.

6 September

Presidential Meeting on Vietnam. CIA participants: DDP & C/FE. Record by DDP & C/FE.

Rusk stressed the immediate need for direct contact between Lodge and Diem. Bundy pointed out the necessity of advising Lodge not to have a real show-down with Diem over Nhu at this forthcoming meeting, as one of Lodge's cables indicated he was headed very much in this direction. Rusk agreed to do this. The President agreed with the desirability of silencing Madame Nhu but expressed some doubt that Nhu's participation was as fatal as State seemed to say it was. Rusk commented that the country team had stated its feeling that Nhu must go, to which the President replied that they may have been operating under directives received from here.

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

8 September

Wire services and prominent newspapers carried a story that the Special Forces troops who raided the pagodas on 21 August were still being paid secretly by CIA. This story was attributed to a highly reliable source in Washington and gave details of support to Col. Tung in the amount of $3 million annually, and a payment of $250 thousand on 3 September. The story was datelined in Washington and in Manila.

David Bell warned in a television interview that the US Congress might cut back aid to South Vietnam unless the Diem government changed its policies.

(Comment: The U.S. Government publicly confirmed on 8 October 1963 that aid had already been cut, quietly and over a period of some months. Bill Colby, Jocko Richardson, and Dave Smith each told us that the public announcement of the aid reduction was a "signal" to the generals and that the reduction was planned with that in mind. It may be that the cut in aid was deliberately planned to spur the generals on, but, if so, that intention did not find its way into the written record. The nearest thing to it is in the record of a Presidential meeting of 10 September 1963. The President asked Rufus Phillips,

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

of AID, what specific actions Phillips would recommend and he suggested "cutting aid to Colonel Tung which would be viewed by the Generals with much enthusiasm and as an indication of a vigorous American position." In general, though, aid cuts were discussed in terms of bringing pressure on Diem to make needed changes in his regime. However planned or however looked upon by the U.S. administration, it is clear that the Vietnamese generals considered the official confirmation of aid cuts as a clear token of U.S. support of their coup planning.

Spera and Conein met with Generals Minh and Khiem on 29 August. The following are excerpts from the cabled report of the meeting (SAIG 0406):

> "If USA now really ready take different position, generals want firm evidence to that effect. . . . . Queried as to what we can do to show we mean business, Minh flatly stated, stop economic aid to force Nhu to show his hand."

The suspension of aid did not force Diem and Nhu to mend their ways, but it did create an atmosphere that made it easier for the generals to assemble the military support needed for a successful coup.)

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

14-00000

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

SECRET—EYES ONLY

10 September

In an interview by Huntley and Brinkley, the President denied the charge that CIA makes its own policy.

CIA cable from Saigon (SAIG 0760)

"Am inclined to feel general officers will seek evolutionary accommodation with Diem (if he permits them to do so) unless overall situation clearly deteriorates, there is breakdown of civil order or governmental machinery, or unless war effort begins to go backward seriously. . . . . Despite damages suffered since 8 May and 21 August, am inclined to believe we should be able resume successful prosecution of war in military and civil sections. . . . . Do not align myself with the view that USG should suspend aid. . . . . "

Presidential Meeting on Vietnam. CIA participants: DCI & C/FE. Record by C/FE.

Gen. Krulak reported his findings in Vietnam. His conclusions were that the war is going ahead at an impressive pace and that the Viet Cong war will be won if current US military and sociological programs are continued. Mendenhall, the State representative who accompanied Krulak, expressed the view that there was a complete breakdown of the Saigon civilian government and the security situation in the provinces had deteriorated. The President asked whether the two gentlemen had visited the same country. Rusk suggested that the focus be on what happened in July and August that reversed the optimistic judgments in May and June. Mr. McCone talked from a personal telegram he had received from Richardson recommending against any cut in aid.

SECRET—EYES ONLY

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

10 September (continued)

NSC Executive Committee Meeting on Vietnam. CIA participants: DCI & C/FE. Record by C/FE.

Bundy stressed the need to unify the US Government posture, to coordinate press guidance, and to control outgoing messages to Saigon. He emphasized the importance of following the President's guidance on this delicate Vietnam problem, despite intensely differing views as to what should be done, how, the risks, minimum objectives, and the facts. McNamara stated that his position was vigorously against throwing out this government without seeing an alternative and that none appeared to exist. Mr. McCone commented that the problem was not so much the existence of an alternative as how to put one into power. Bundy summarized the President's position as one in which we must express our reservations as to the mistakes and misdeeds of Diem but not be in a position where we cannot deal with him further.

11 September

CIA cable from Saigon (SAIG 0797)

Richardson reported that the country team attempted to agree on a six-page summary cable to answer a cable from the Department requesting views. The team was unable to agree even on the first three pages of the summary. Weede and Richardson dissented on the basis that the draft

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

11 Sept cont.

summary was too sweeping and too negative, concluding definitively about the country as a whole on an inadequate basis of data. He said: "In some ways we seem to have reached the point in official American community that, if you think we can win with present government, you are simply not running in right direction with majority."

State telegram from Saigon (No. 478) Lodge

"My best estimate of the current situation in Vietnam is: (a) that it is worsening rapidly; (b) that the time has arrived for the US to use what effective sanctions it has to bring about the fall of the existing government and the installation of another; and (c) that intensive study should be given by the best brains in the government to all the details, procedures, and variants in connection with the suspension of aid."

Presidential Meeting on Vietnam. CIA participants: DCI & C/FE. Record by C/FE.

McNamara pointed out that Lodge has had little contact with Diem and has not been out of Saigon. Mr. McCone commented that he believed that we should move cautiously, that we should talk seriously to Diem and that Lodge should be urged to visit the countryside to obtain a more realistic view of the effects of suspending aid. Mr. McCone also suggested that another approach be made to Nhu to seek his cooperation in a departure. The President asked whether we had carefully studied the detailed effects of cuts in aid (as proposed in a paper prepared by Hilsman). It was evident that the effects had not been studied.

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

SECRET—EYES ONLY

11 Sept cont

The President asked DOD and CIA to analyze the Hilsman paper. He also asked that a telegram be sent to Lodge asking him to try to reduce the press leakage in Saigon and to establish some real contact with Diem. Any current plans for aid negotiations should be stalled, and the President said he should be well informed of any steps taken in this context--such as the incident involving CIA payment to Col. Tung last week.

11 September (continued)

NSC Executive Committee Meeting on Vietnam. CIA participants: DCI & C/FE. Record by C/FE.

Rusk said he believed that we were not likely to achieve an independent Vietnam unless we could eliminate Nhu. At the same time he was not willing to say that Diem should go, as he saw no alternative. Rusk commented that we should work through Lodge on Diem to take over the real leadership and become the real president. Mr. McCone suggested also the desirability of negotiating with Nhu. Bundy read off a CIA suggestion for a process of negotiating with Nhu.

13 September

CIA cable from Saigon (SAIG 0890)

Huntington Sheldon, who visited Saigon, reported his views on the situation in Vietnam. He included as part of his report the substance

SECRET—EYES ONLY

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

of a discussion with DCM Trueheart: "The Ambassador is considering charging MACV with making approach to SVN military, he mentioned Gen. Don, to attempt stimulate early coup action with appropriate US assurances. I inquired had Ambassador made such proposal to Washington and was told this was within Lodge's authority."

15 September

Neil Sheehan writing from Saigon stated that the various elements of the US mission in Vietnam were so badly divided that Washington had intervened. He said: "The only civilian official still strongly in favor of going along with the Ngo family regime is the Chief of the Central Intelligence Agency here." On the same day, David Halberstam stated that high US civilian officials in Saigon were making an all-out effort to convince Washington that the military and political situation is deteriorating. He said that "the Chief of the Central Intelligence Agency favors all-out support for the present regime but that almost all other members of his staff are embittered over the raids on the pagodas. They also feel their Chief's close association with Nhu, while necessary, has severely damaged intelligence gathering.

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

16 September

CIA cable from Saigon (SAIG 0922)

Richardson replied to Washington's request for his judgment on the desirability and feasibility of certain ideas, as Washington was then in the course of constructing an agreed plan. He cabled:

"We must go on trying to win war with current administration for as long as it persists in power. . . . . We should not attempt publicly to achieve objectives with respect to GVN when probability of attainment is virtually nil. . . . . We cannot covertly tinker with or engineer a coup unless general situation is reasonably propitiitious and if we are unable to establish necessary working contacts with Vietnamese leaders willing and able to do the job with necessary means. . . . . Agree we should carefully explore and perhaps carefully experiment with graduated measures designed to pressure Diem, within context of persuading him, to take steps needed. These measures would be more effective if they are limited to practical and achievable objectives. . . . . "

17 September

Memorandum for the Record prepared by DDP

"Smith . . . discussed with me . . . reports that Lodge wanted to get rid of Mr. John Richardson. . . . . Mike Dunn . . . had told Conein . . . that Lodge was going 'to get rid of Richardson'. . . . . On one occasion Dunn asked Conein, 'Do you think that Dave Smith can run the station for a temporary period while a new Station Chief is being sent out here?'"

19 September

Lodge to the President: State telegram from Saigon (No. 544)

"I agree that no good opportunity for action to remove present

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

government in immediate future is apparent and that we should, therefore, do whatever we can as an interim measure pending such an eventuality. . . . . Frankly, I see no opportunity at all for substantive changes."

Personal letter from McCone to Lodge

"I was told by Dean Rusk that you had proposed that General Lansdale . . . replace Richardson as Chief of Station. . . . . I wish to emphasize that the Agency will reorient the Saigon Station in any practical way to meet your desires. Personnel, including the Station Chief, can be replaced. . . . . Lansdale would not be acceptable to the organization or to me personally. . . . . If the decision is to abandon all hope of working with the regime, then Richardson probably should be replaced. . . . . We have no current intelligence nor resulting estimate in hand which would lead us to the conclusion that the present regime can be disposed of, or that there exists a replacement regime which would be better. This is not however to say that a coup might not occur even before you receive this letter. . . . . "

23 September

DCI briefing of CIA Subcommittee of House Armed Services

The Director said there did not appear to be any cohesive military group capable of ousting the Diem regime, and further that there appeared to be no replacement for the then current regime that was capable of running the government. A new regime probably would be no better. Consequently, the Agency was urging a cautious, slow approach to the problem.

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

14-00000

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

~~SECRET EYES ONLY~~

2 October

Report of McNamara-Taylor mission to Vietnam

The President on 21 September had directed General Taylor and Secretary McNamara to proceed to South Vietnam to appraise the situation. Their trip lasted from 24 September to 2 October. This was the report in which McNamara recommended that a program be established to train Vietnamese so that essential functions performed by US military personnel could be carried out by Vietnamese by the end of 1965. He thought it would then be possible to withdraw the bulk of US personnel.

3 October

Personal letter from Lodge to McCone

" . . . . . I agree with what I understand McNamara has said to you. The time has come for a new face. But, I also think of Richardson as a devoted and patriotic American . . . . "

Change of C.I.A. C.O.S.

4 October

CIA cable from Saigon (SAIG 1397)

" . . . . . In sum, it is clear that Lodge wants a change in Chief of Station. . . . . Departing Saigon 1820 hours 5 October . . . . . "

(Comment: Richardson's departure was based on a headquarters request that he return to headquarters on TDY as soon as possible. Upon Richardson's departure, his deputy, David R. Smith, became Acting Chief of Station."

~~SECRET EYES ONLY~~

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

5 October

Presidential Meeting on Vietnam. CIA participant: DCI only. Record by DCI.

The meeting was held to discuss matters that became the subject of Deptel 534 [see later entry of 5 October]. DCI said it was the opinion of CIA (with the exception of Colby, C/FE) that fiddling with the Commodity Import Program as a political lever would be much more likely to create an economic crisis undermining the war effort than to scare Diem and Nhu into a more cooperative attitude, because it would seriously affect the confidence and planning of the Vietnamese business community and quickly engender inflationary measures among the population at large of a more serious nature.

What was Colby's position?

It was the consensus of the meeting that some meaningful political movements had to be made, but exactly what they should be was not determined.

CIA cable from Saigon (SAIG 1445)

In a meeting with Conein (approved by the Ambassador on 2 October), General Minh requested a statement of the US position with respect to a change in the GVN in the near future. He said he did not expect USG support of a coup effort, but did need USG assurances that the USG would not try to thwart his plans. He outlined three

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

possible plans for the accomplishment of the change of government: (a) assassination of Ngo Dinh Nhu and Ngo Dinh Can, keeping President Diem in office; (b) encirclement of Saigon by various military units; and (c) direct confrontation between military units involved in the coup and loyalist military units in Saigon.

5 October (continued)

CIA cable from Saigon (SAIG 1447)

Dave Smith, the Acting COS, cabled that he had discussed this latest Conein/Minh meeting with Ambassador Lodge and DCM Truehart. Smith reported that he had recommended to Ambassador Lodge that: "We do not set ourselves irrevocably against the assassination plot, since the other two alternatives mean either a bloodbath in Saigon or a protracted struggle which could rip the army and the country asunder."

(Comment: Smith's recommendation to Lodge on assassination drew a prompt response from headquarters. The two entries that follow interrupt the chronology. They are put here to complete the story on this significant episode.)

CIA cable to Saigon (DIR 73661 of 6 October)

" . . . McCone directs that you withdraw recommendation to Ambassador [concerning assassination plan] under McCone instructions, as we cannot be in position actively condoning such course of action and thereby engaging our responsibility therefor."

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

CIA cable from Saigon (SAIG 1463 of 7 October)

"Action taken as directed. In addition, since DCM Trueheart was also present when original recommendation was made, specific withdrawal of recommendation at McCone's instruction was also conveyed to Trueheart. Ambassador Lodge commented that he shares McCone's opinion."

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

5 October (continued)

State cable to Saigon (Deptel No. 534)

The Department cabled guidance to the Ambassador resulting from NSC consideration of the 2 October McNamara-Taylor report. These points were included: (1) Existing suspension of new commitments under the AID Commodity Import Program will be maintained. (2) PL 480 (condensed milk) will be handled on a month-to-month basis but will not be suspended. (3) AID Project Loans will be "suspended for review." (4) Ambassador should continue his policy of "cool correctness" toward GVN.

5 Oct

White House cable to Saigon (CAP 63560)

" . . . President today approved recommendation that no initiative should now be taken to give any active covert encouragement to a coup. There should, however, be urgent covert effort with closest security under broad guidance of Ambassador to identify and build contacts with possible alternative leadership as and when it appears . . . . . "

8 October

The UN General Assembly agreed to send a fact-finding mission to South Vietnam to investigate charges of government oppression of Buddhists.

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

(Comment: The fact-finding group left New York 21 October and arrived in Saigon on the 24th. It first met with Ngo Dinh Nhu and then visited the Xa Loi pagoda, considered the command post of the Buddhist protest movement, where it found only two monks and South Vietnamese secret policemen. A planned visit to the An Quang pagoda was barred by the Diem government. The mission did manage to visit An Quang on 27 October and interviewed Thich Tinh Keit in the presence of a number of secret police. The 1 November generals' coup interrupted the mission's work, and it left South Vietnam on 3 November.

(The UN General Assembly accepted without vote on 13 December a decision to discontinue investigation of alleged repression of Buddhists in South Vietnam. Assembly President Rodriguez said Buddhist oppression by the government had ceased to be an issue since the ouster of the Diem government.

(The fact-finding commission had issued its report on 11 December. It arrived at no conclusions but merely detailed testimony taken during its probe.)

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

SECRET EYES ONLY

Presidents
Position re: CIA action in Vietnam

9 October

President's news conference:

"I know that the transfer of Mr. John Richardson, who is a very dedicated public servant, has led to surmises, but I can assure you flatly that the CIA has not carried out independent activities, but has operated under close control of the Director of Central Intelligence operating under the--with the cooperation of the National Security Council and under my instructions."

CIA cable to Saigon - Eyes Only for Ambassador (DIR 74228)

" . . . . . While we do not wish to stimulate coup, we also do not wish to leave impression that US would thwart a change of government or deny economic and military assistance to a new regime if it appeared capable of increasing effectiveness of military effort, ensuring popular support to win war and improving working relations with US." The cable urges that the contact with Minh press for "detailed information clearly indicating that Minh's plans offer a high prospect of success."

Colby cable

(Comment: William Colby is the originator of this cable, and it was released by a Cable Secretariat Duty Officer by direction of Colby. The text states that these "additional general thoughts" had been discussed with the President and that the cable had been cleared with "high officials in White House, State, Defense and CIA.")

SECRET EYES ONLY

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

10 October

Saigon Station's "History of the Vietnamese Generals' Coup"

The Ambassador instructed CIA not to initiate contact with Generals Minh or Don, but if the generals initiate contact, such contacts were authorized. In the course of meetings with Minh or Don, assurances were to be given as specified in DIR 74228 of 9 October.

DCI briefing of Senate Foreign Relations Committee

"We have not seen a successor government in the wings that we could say positively would be an improvement over Diem. Therefore it has been our counsel that we must proceed cautiously, otherwise a situation might flare up which might result in something of a civil war, and the Communists would come out the victor merely by sitting on the sidelines."

23 October

Saigon Station's "History of the Vietnamese Generals' Coup"

At a meeting with Conein requested by General Don, Don said the generals had decided to try to stage a coup within a week following 26 October. Conein, under instructions, passed the substance of DIR 74228 to Don. Don promised he would seek permission of the coup committee to give Conein their political plan for the Ambassador's eyes only.

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

14-00000
Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

SECRET-EYES ONLY

24 October

Memorandum for the Record prepared by the Executive Director following a meeting with Kenneth Hansen, Bureau of the Budget

At Hansen's initial meeting with Lodge, Lodge made these charges: (1) CIA was improperly dealing with Nhu; (2) CIA was reluctant to turn over to the military its operations among the hill tribes; (3) CIA had inadequate penetrations of the GVN and the Buddhists and was caught by surprise; (4) Richardson had a palatial mansion and entertained government officials there; (5) The CIA Station was too large and too visible; (6) CIA acted on its own initiative without coordination and without any control from either the Ambassador or Washington.

Hansen said he later reported to Lodge that he thought Lodge's charges were erroneous. He said he was convinced that everything CIA had done in Vietnam had been approved in Washington, coordinated with and carried out under the directions of the Ambassador, and had been carried out with both good judgment and a high quality of performance.

Hansen noted that at the time of his first meeting with Lodge, Lodge had not yet had a full briefing on what the Agency was doing. This took place a few days later.

SECRET-EYES ONLY

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

24 October (continued)

Saigon Station's "History of the Vietnamese Generals' Coup"

Conein held two meetings with General Don on 24 October. Don reported he had been informed by General Harkins that the U.S. military would not thwart any coup plans. Don said the coup plans were complete; that the necessary military units were available; and that the coup would occur no later than 2 November. In the second meeting, Don said the coup committee refused to turn over the political plan but authorized Don to outline its substance, which he did.

CIA cable to Saigon (DIR 78161)

Bundy

Eyes only for Lodge and Harkins from Bundy: "..... There may be danger Nhu attempting entrapment through Don's approaches to Conein. ..... Feel quite strongly that Lodge and Harkins should stand back from any non-essential involvement. ..... It seems wise to maintain close control over meetings between Don and Conein."

Re CIA Contact Gen DON.

CIA cable from Saigon (SAIG 1964)

Bundy from Lodge: "CAS has been punctilious in carrying out my instructions. I have personally approved each meeting between General Don and Conein who has carried out my orders in each instance explicitly. . . . . "

Lodge

25 October

Presidential Meeting on Vietnam. CIA participant: DCI only. Record by DCI.

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

The President stated that the purpose of the meeting was to consider: (1) recent actions in SVN with respect to coup planning and qualifications of the individuals reporting; and (2) our policy in SVN, as he wished to be assured there was unanimity within the government prior to the return of Lodge for consultations. The DCI stated his views in detail. In essence, he held: (1) Don might be managed by Nhu; (2) CIA has no control and therefore could assume little responsibility; (3) Don could have a coup in the making and could pull it off; (4) We are handling a delicate situation in a non-professional manner; (5) Successful coup would lead to confusion because generals would provide weak leadership; (6) One coup would be followed by another and the war might be lost during period of political confusion; (7) Civilians capable of running SVN could not be injected into the government and exercise effective control; (8) Cannot discuss important political issues with Diem because of the policy of "correct, cool attitude;" (9) We either have to work with Diem and Nhu or we have to take aggressive steps to remove them, and it is not clear that the succeeding government would be much better.

Detailed views of Mr. Colby to Pres.

28 October

Saigon Station's "History of the Vietnamese Generals' Coup"

General Don asked Lodge if Conein was speaking for the Ambassador.

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Lodge replied in the affirmative. Don told the Ambassador that the US Government should not interfere with or try to stimulate a coup. The Ambassador agreed with Don.

23 October (continued)

Saigon Station's "History of the Vietnamese Generals' Coup"

Conein met with General Don for the last time before the coup was launched. Don confirmed that he had talked with the Ambassador who had vouched for Conein. Don stated he was leaving on 29 October to coordinate final plans. Don requested Conein to remain at home beginning 30 October--until further notice. Don repeated that the Ambassador would have the plans before the coup began, but when pressed on his previous commitment to make them available 48 hours in advance, Don said that possibly the plans could only be made available four hours in advance. Don said nothing would be happening within the next 48 hours and that, if there was a good reason for the Ambassador to change his planned 31 October departure, the Ambassador would be informed in time to make his own decision.

(X)

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

SECRET—EYES ONLY

29 October

Coup Terminated

CIA cable from Saigon (SAIG 2040)

In an eyes only cable sent via CIA channels, Lodge gives his views on the seemingly imminent coup: "In summary, it would appear that a coup attempt by the generals' group is imminent . . . and that no positive action by the USG can prevent a coup attempt short of informing Diem and Nhu. . . . . Although there have been no requests to date by the generals for material or financial support, we must anticipate that such request may be forthcoming. . . . . "

Presidential Meeting on Vietnam. CIA participants: DCI, DDP, & C/FE. Record by DDP & C/FE.

It was suggested that in the Ambassador's absence, Harkins, Trueheart, and David Smith act as a committee to direct any coup operation. DCI countered with the view that Smith should not be involved in such a policy-making function, although he would be in a position to provide technical advice to Harkins and Trueheart as well as carry out their instructions in the operational field. The President stated that if the forces in Saigon were not clearly in favor of the coup, we should discourage its launching. The Attorney General felt the US was risking too much based on flimsy evidence. The DCI stated his view that even a successful coup would create a period of interregnum and confusion which might only be solved by a second or third coup.

SECRET—EYES ONLY

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

30 October

CIA cable to Saigon (DIR 79109)

Bundy to Lodge: " . . . . . chances of action with or without our approval now so significant that we should urgently consider our attitude and contingency plans. . . . . Believe our attitude to coup group can still have decisive effect on its decision. . . . . We must have assurance balance of forces clearly favorable. . . . . Conein should express to Don that we do not find presently revealed plans give clear prospect of quick results. . . . . We badly need some corroborative evidence whether Minh and others directly and completely involved. . . . . highest authority desires it clearly understood that after your departure Harkins should participate in supervision of all coup contacts and that in event a coup begins, he become head of country team. . . . . "

CIA cable from Saigon (SAIG 2063)

Lodge's reply: " . . . . . do not think we have the power to delay or discourage a coup. Don has made it clear many times that this is a Vietnamese affair. . . . . I believe we should continue our present position of keeping hands off but continue to monitor and press for more detailed information. CAS has been analyzing forces for some time and it is their estimate that the generals have probably figured their chances pretty closely. . . . . It does not seem sensible to have the military in charge of a matter which is so profoundly political as a change of government. . . . . As to requests from the generals, they may well have need of funds at the last moment with which to buy off potential opposition. To the extent that these funds can be passed discreetly, I believe we should furnish them. . . . . If we were convinced that the coup was going to fail, we would of course do everything we could to stop it. Gen. Harkins has read this and does not concur."

CIA cable to Saigon (DIR 79407)

CAP 63598: " . . . . . We do not accept as a basis for US policy that we have no power to delay or discourage a coup. . . . . We cannot limit ourselves to proposition implied in your message that only conviction of certain failure justifies intervention. . . . . US authorities will reject appeals for direct intervention from either side. . . . . " The White House repeats its instructions on command of the country team after Lodge leaves.

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

30 October (continued)

CIA cable from Saigon (WAIC 2094)

Cable from Lodge (in its entirety): "Thanks for your sagacious instruction. Will carry out to best of my ability.

1 November

The coup began at 1315 hours, Saigon time, which is equivalent to 0015 hours, Washington time, 1 November. The following account is drawn from several sources: the Saigon Station's history of the coup and various cables.

Coup begins 68K

At 1315 hours, the Aide de Camp to General Don came to Conein's house, told him that the coup was in progress, and said that General Don wanted Conein at Joint General Staff (JGS) headquarters. The aide also asked Conein to bring with him as much money as Conein could readily lay hands upon. The station had stored five million piasters (about $68,000 at the official rate) in a safe in Conein's house against such a contingency. Conein took three million with him. General Don used the money to reward opposition military units who joined the coup group. On 2 November, General Don informed Conein that he needed money to pay the families of persons killed during the coup. Conein gave General Don an additional 1,750,000 piasters. One bundle of 250,000 piasters was overlooked and was found

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

14-00000

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

later in Conein's safe. The passing of these funds is obviously a very sensitive matter. Dave Smith reported by cable on 25 November 1963 that the disbursement had not yet been discussed with the Ambassador. The files do not show whether the Ambassador was ever told. In a State cable from Saigon of 24 April 1964, Lodge reports a meeting he had that day with General Minh. It reads in part:

> "He then said: 'I want to ask you a question about a money matter. Did Conein ever give General Don money for the November 1 coup?'
>
> "I said: 'Definitely not. Had he done such a thing, I would certainly have known it.'"

We asked Dave Smith about this, and he said he thought that the Ambassador had eventually been told that the money had been passed. We can neither confirm nor refute from the record.

Thus, Conein went to JGS headquarters and remained at the command post throughout the struggle. Before leaving his home, Conein alerted the station by radio. Upon arriving at JGS headquarters, Conein was told by General Don that Don had tried unsuccessfully to reach Conein earlier by telephone. A later check revealed that Conein's telephone was out of order. Conein was told that he was to keep a telephone line open to the Ambassador. Because there was a CIA officer on the scene and in intimate contact with the coup principals,

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

the station was able to report almost minute-by-minute progress of the coup.

The fact that Conein was at JCS headquarters is well known in official circles. On 24 October, headquarters had cabled the station: "In future do not repeat not put message re coup plots or rumors in CRITIC channel. Rather you should slug them IMMEDIATE ATTENTION FOR BRENT." As a consequence, the first cabled reports from the station came in as regular CIA cables and were put onto the CRITIC network here at headquarters. The first cable was received at headquarters at 0117 hours, Washington time, and was filed on the CRITIC network at 0159. At 0256 hours, following receipt of the sixth non-CRITIC cable, headquarters instructed the station to put the coup reporting on the CRITIC network at the station. Sometime during the day of 1 November (the confirmation copy of the cable lacks a date/time stamp) headquarters cabled a warning to the station against including the names of CIA personnel in its CRITIC cables. Conein is identified by name and as being at JCS headquarters in eleven CRITIC messages, seven of which were put into the CRITIC channel, without the name being deleted, here at headquarters.

At 1030 hours 2 November (in Saigon) the Saigon radio announced that both Diem and Nhu had committed suicide by taking poison. Later in the day General Minh said that Diem and Nhu escaped from Gia Long

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Palace shortly after 0700 hours on 2 November by a tunnel unknown to the generals. They left the tunnel in the dock area and went to a Catholic church in Cholon where they took poison. They were discovered at the church at 1030 hours.

We do not have a truly reliable account of the circumstances of their deaths, but they certainly were not by suicide. According to one of Conein's reports, Diem called General Don at 0650 hours 2 November and offered to surrender unconditionally. General Minh immediately ordered all telephones removed from rooms in their JGS command post area. This cut off all communication with the outside except for radios under Minh's control.

On 16 November 1963 a field-grade officer of the JGS, who was deeply involved in the coup and whose reliability the station could not judge (nor did it name him), gave a station officer two photographs of the bodies of Diem and Nhu, which he claimed he had taken at the request of General Kim. The photographs show that the deaths were very bloody. The source gave the following account of the deaths:

> The officer was present when the Military Revolutionary Committee debated the ultimate disposition of the brothers, accompanied the force that apprehended them, and witnessed the events immediately after their deaths. He was not present in the M-113 armored personnel carrier at the time of the deaths.
>
> A lengthy argument took place on the night of 1-2 November as to the ultimate disposition of Diem and Nhu, with most of the generals favoring their execution. The ultimate decision was

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276

to kill them. A Captain Nhung was designated as executioner.

On the morning of 2 November, the Committee received a phone call from a casual informant telling where Diem and Nhu could be found. A force was dispatched to apprehend them. [This appears to conflict with Conein's report that the phones had been pulled out.] Shortly after 10:00 a.m., Diem and Nhu entered the personnel carrier with Captain Nhung.

Upon arrival at the JCS headquarters, Diem and Nhu were dead. Nhu had been stabbed 21 times in the back with a carbine bayonet and shot five times. Diem had been shot twice in the chest. Nhung leaped from the M-113 with the bayonet in hand and proudly displayed it to all observers. His arms were soaked with blood. [From the photos, it looks as if Diem and Nhu had their hands tied behind their backs.]

To recap:

a. CIA was not in favor of the decision to abandon the Diem regime, but faithfully carried out instructions.

b. CIA officers Conein and Spera were the contacts with the coup generals, but only as approved and under instructions.

c. A CIA officer, Conein, was at the generals' command post throughout the fighting.

d. Conein furnished General Don about $65,000 to buy off opposition military units while the coup was in progress.

e. CIA had no hand in the assassinations and had no foreknowledge of them.

Approved for Release: 2024/08/05 C00566276